A MUSIC PROGRAM FOR BLINDED

VETERANS

Ben Bernstein

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BEN BERNSTEIN

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The Story of the Music Department in Old Farms Convalescent Hospital

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IN the beautifully wooded hills just outside Hartford, Connecticut, is located a group of buildings, architecturally unique in this country. The owner and builder, a person of imagination, went all the way to Eton College in England for ideas and the finished product was a close copy of a medieval seat of learning. With its thick stone walls, great oaken beams, latticed windows and narrow, winding stone stairs it took one back to another and perhaps gentler age. Gentler, that is, to the extent that man had not, as yet, advanced so far in the art of mass extermination and efficient savagery as in our day.

A personal note from the office of the Surgeon General of the Army, informing me of a new project undertaken by the service for the purpose of aiding in the process of socially readjusting blinded veterans, was my first inkling of what was to be, for me, a most enlightening year and a half. True, I had in the past done considerable work with the blind but my task had been concerned with children and adolescents, blind from an early age or from birth. In the case of mature men, however, I realized that the problems would be entirely different from any with which I had had previous experience. Would there be a great deal of bitterness? How about individual differences in backgrounds? These were but some of the questions which came to mind.

In due time I found myself reporting to the Commandant at Old Farms Convalescent Hospital, just beyond Avon, Connecticut, and as I had hoped, was placed in charge of a program of instrumental music exclusive of piano. Instruction on that instrument having been ably offered since the opening of the hospital. During my initial interview I was further informed that due to the recency of the entire undertaking only a modest beginning had been made toward the development of a training program. Music long having exerted a positive influence in the lives of the blind and having a recognized place of importance in a project of this sort, the authorities were anxious that this type of activity be inclusive and far reaching. Instruction in orchestral instruments was to begin as soon as possible.

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My first task was an attempt to survey the situation and to ascertain the immediate desires of the men. I determined to find out how these needs might best be met with the limited equipment on hand. There was an immediate necessity to formulate a set of practical workable objectives. I found that the average trainee spent eighteen weeks at the hospital just prior to his discharge and during this time was able to sample a variety of pursuits ranging all the way from working at hand skills in the various shops to learning the fine points of insurance salesmanship. The last four weeks of this period were spent in actual service either in a factory or office in Hartford, competing on an equal basis with sighted persons, and at a comparable salary. In the meantime the individual trainee was given extensive orientation. He was taught how to move about from place to place on his own and how to avoid many of the obstacles sighted persons take for granted, such as trees, posts or children's toys carelessly left lying upon the sidewalk. Training was given in the technique of the cane and how to interpret echoes in determining locations as well as placing proper emphasis on the remaining senses. Personal appearance and the avoidance of mannerisms known as blindisms came in for their proper stress. Winter and summer sports, stressing participation, were also introduced. The trainee was taught how to get about in a crowded city, how to get on and off busses and trains entirely on his own. No effort was spared in an attempt to build self-confidence in the ability of the blind to compete on a par with the sighted within the limitation of his handicap. The avoidance of idleness was stressed, as well as the advisability of working at an occupation.

The place and function of music in such a program became at once apparent. Of necessity the blind are apt to have considerable idle time on their hands and providing wholesome and stabilizing as well as beneficial use for this time could hardly be overemphasized. The results of my survey showed that ranking in order of popularity and demand were piano, guitar, accordion and violin. The men liked to sing but were uninterested in any formal classes in glee club. (The attendance at all classes was purely voluntary at Old Farms.) To meet this situation, informal singing groups were encouraged through staff members attending places of congregation during evening hours, beginning to play familiar songs at the piano and encouraging onlookers (of which there were usually many) to join in.

During summer months the procedure out of doors was similar except that a guitar was used as accompaniment. The response was positive and immediate and accomplished the desired results, namely, to help build up a sense of confidence and personal worth as well as to help soothe torn and jangled nerves. The music used was of the quieter variety.

perform a job analysis for use in establishing course content and procedures. A few illustrations will make this clear.

Ear-training is required in all approved teacher-training institutions. The way it is taught, in most instances, bears little relationship to the problems which will have to be solved by the ear in a teaching situation. Most of the work is done with the piano or voices, whereas in actual situations the whole context of the problem is altered because of instrumental tone colors. In practice, the ear must hear errors in playing which deviate from the given score; in training, the student seeks to write out chords or determine the tones given to each voice. In practice, the ear must discriminate between good and bad tone production, good and bad balance, intonation, attacks, releases and the like. Very rarely does "ear-training" focus the attention on such details—details which may have a great deal to do with the ultimate success or failure of a teacher.

Piano is another universal requirement. Piano becomes a tool subject when the student's major field of performance is on some other instrument or voice. As soon as the student has developed enough mastery of mechanical problems, he should be given considerable practice in playing accompaniments and in doing as much reading as time will permit. In this case, piano is not used so much to develop musicianship as it is to aid the teacher in everyday situations he will meet in the teaching field. Nevertheless, it is quite common for the beginning teacher to be able to play a few Bach inventions, learned through constant repetition, and be totally unable to read and to play the easiest of accompaniments. This is a necessary skill which can be taught when the emphasis is properly placed—when piano is taught as a tool subject.

Another course which does not achieve its purpose is the course in conducting. Such a course would seem to be the proper place to consider those problems which the school music teacher will meet on the job. Possibly a course should be set up especially for those students majoring in music education, since their problems are so dissimilar to those of the conductor of professional groups. It has been traditional to develop a baton technique of sorts and then to concentrate on problems of interpretation as found in great orchestral masterpieces. Very little, if any, attention is paid to the problem of getting a choral group to sing in tune, a band to play with good tone quality, an orchestra to use proper bowing, and all of the other similar problems which make for success or failure when working with school groups. It is what the conductor does when he puts down his baton that so largely determines his success or failure and these are just the problems which are neglected in the traditional course in conducting. It certainly is in order to suggest, also, that such a course might well be taught by someone who is very conversant with problems which his students will have to face in their work.

Music Education Courses

Here we have under consideration the so-called "methods" courses which have been so maligned, and often rightfully so. Let us admit, from the outset, that the courses in music education have been poorly taught more often than they have been well taught, but let us go on and see why this has been true.

FOUR YEARS, says the author, is a short time in which to prepare a person for a career in music education. Nevertheless, it is all the time which is available to us and therefore it behooves us to use the time more wisely and efficiently than we have in the past. Many of the problems which we face are quite possible of solution provided we focus our attention on them and take positive action to strengthen obvious weaknesses. To do this, more institutions must reorganize their work so as to make the training of public school music teachers their chief function. All such institutions can profit by:

(1) Recognizing the importance of personality in teaching and doing something about personality training during the four-year training period.

(2) Reorganizing music content courses so that they will serve the purpose for which they are intended in actual teaching situations.

(3) Taking steps to see that courses in music education are functional courses, taught by persons well qualified in their particular fields and possessing a background of successful experience.

In spite of the fact that most educators will admit that methods of teaching are important in high school and college as well as in the elementary school, all too many of those persons directly charged with the responsibility of developing a teacher-training course for music educators have little respect or interest in such courses, and offer them merely as a means of satisfying some requirement for getting a state teaching certificate. The result is that teachers of such courses are selected with little care and consideration of background. It is not at all uncommon to hire a piano or voice teacher who is competent in that field, and also require her to teach a "methods" course as a part of her work, her preparation for such work consisting of one undergraduate course in music education and no teaching experience. It is hardly any wonder, then, that the course is not an inspirational one, nor one that students look back on with any degree of satisfaction. Institutions which engage in these practices usually proceed on the theory that knowledge of subject matter is all that is necessary for teaching success.

Certainly there is a great deal a teacher with a good background of successful school music teaching can do for the student who has never had any contact with school problems. The problem of proper materials to be used in various situations is enough in itself to confound the beginning teacher, inasmuch as more material appears daily. But when the teacher and student start with a similar background of actual teaching experience, the course can hardly help but be "from the text" with little variation.

Therefore, if students complain that they get little or nothing from their courses in music education, let us look further into the matter knowing that the problem in such courses should not be how to fill up the time but, rather, how to get in all the practical matters with which a young teacher should be conversant. Strong courses of this type are often the difference between failure and success in the first years of teaching, when the beginner is confronted with such a world of problems. Let us urge those in charge of hiring teachers of music education courses to be as careful as they are when hiring teachers of voice, piano, theory and other content courses, and that one of the requisites be a background of successful teaching experience or extensive observation in the fields of music education to be taught.

Through the efforts of the Red Cross and other organizations, the music department was able to secure enough instruments of usable quality to make a start toward developing a project of instrumental music instruction. The aims at once became quite clear, namely, through individual instruction to acquaint each man, in keeping with individual differences, with the proper method of holding and manipulating his chosen instrument, giving him the necessary tools with which to make musical sounds, and finally organizing these sounds into familiar pieces. Teaching was done entirely by rote as the process of learning Braille music is a laborious and tedious one and only in those rare cases of an expressed desire for this skill was it undertaken.

Once the actual playing of pieces was accomplished progress was fairly certain and simple. The learning became much more meaningful to the individual and interest continued high.

Close attention had constantly to be given to local environmental desires. The boy from rural areas was keenly aware of a sense of accomplishment when he was able to "fiddle" a "hoe down," while those from urban districts experienced equal satisfaction upon being able to supply the correct chords with the guitar for such familiar selections as "Whispering." With the boys from the South the tunes of such local celebrities as Ernest Tubb were very much in demand. In this way it was possible to build a foundation in music should the individual wish to continue study upon his return home.

With the final arrival of additional instruments through regular Army channels courses on drums, brass and woodwinds were possible. In the case of the former, considerable of the rudiments of drumming were learned in a short time and when sufficient technique was gained, accompanying popular dance recordings was attempted.

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Among the trainee body at Old Farms were a considerable number of men who in addition to being blind had other handicaps such as loss of limb. These men were not neglected. I can best illustrate this by recalling the case of Lt. X——, a fine, intelligent Negro lad from the west. This man was injured in an explosion. In addition to total blindness he was minus his right hand, off at the wrist and had only the thumb remaining on his left hand. In addition to having a pleasing tenor voice he was possessed of an indomitable spirit. He refused to be beaten. Immediately upon entering Old Farms he made known a desire to study voice. As he expressed it, he wanted to learn the songs he had always liked but had never been able to get around to singing. During a conversation with him one evening I casually inquired if he would be interested in an attempt to play the trombone.

His response was instantaneous and with the help of the department of hand skills we were able to devise a prosthesis to fit his left hand which enabled him to hold the instrument. The slide was operated by means of a hook attached to the stump of his right forearm. His progress was excellent, but more important still, his sense of accomplishment resulted in the purchase of his own instrument and the continuation of study after leaving the school. He has since gone into Braille music, reading it with his thumb, and has remarked that the mastery of this skill, though only in a small way, has opened an entirely new world to him—that of participation.

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The final phase of the music program for blinded veterans, with which I wish to deal, is that of appreciation. It was determined early that there was a certain group of men for whom such a course would be especially beneficial from a therapeutic point of view. This was particularly true of those in a highly nervous and jumpy state. A quiet and restful room was selected, away from distracting influences. It was furnished with overstuffed furniture and provided with such objects as low tables and ash trays. An excellent reproducing machine was procured and those deemed most in need of this type of experience were encouraged to attend. (The selection of the men was at first determined by the post psychologist, but later the course was opened to all who desired it.) Introductory music was of the quieter and more familiar folk variety, such as that of Stephen Foster. The best available recordings were used. The music of Foster was followed by Gypsy melodies and an attempt was made to point out various elements of interest. Music of a light, modern vein was next introduced—for example, selections of Kern and Lehar. This was followed by music of a gay character, such as Strauss waltzes and "Gaiete Parisienne," by Offenbach.

All of this naturally led to a consideration of instrumental sonorities and the make-up of a major symphony orchestra. An attempt was made to recognize orchestral instruments from their sound and to learn familiar themes. From this point some of the more familiar and likely to be heard concerti were considered and a familiar tie-up was made with themes from these works featured by various dance orchestras.

As a direct outgrowth of this course many of the men began making collections for their own personal record libraries—men who had previously listened to nothing more involved than a dance band. Time permitting, the course was culminated by examples of Mozart, and some mention was made of the schools of musical composition. There was much evidence of actual physical benefit from this type of experience.

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At this date most of the blinded men who are capable of being helped have gone through Old Farms Convalescent Hospital. Many have come out to find lives of usefulness in fields of their particular interests or talents. From the beginning the school never sought to do more than to help men to make an adjustment to a lifetime of blindness, and to point out the various possibilities for the blind. I have had a chance to know personally and to observe a large number of the men thus aided, and the impressions I have gained have been both profound and lasting. Here, indeed, is proof of the ability of human beings to readjust in spite of staggering physical handicaps and emotional setbacks—and to come through it all free from bitterness and rancor, willing to take on the world at its own terms, asking nothing but the chance to serve again!

The State Music Educators Associations

Purposes and Potentialities of the State Organizations of School Music Teachers

PHILIP GORDON

ONE of the fundamental needs of a state music teachers' association is a clearly defined statement of purposes. Such a proposition immediately provokes the objection that it is a waste of time to get involved in a lot of paper work when the worthwhile purposes are being pursued in actual practice, and without all the fuss of formulating a philosophy.

No one will deny that there are good educational purposes implicit in the activities usually carried on by music teachers' associations. But it must be admitted that these activities generally follow a limited range; they are likely to consist of meetings for teachers and festivals for pupils. Good as these activities are, they do not implement the manifold possibilities of a music teachers' association. By formulating objectives one becomes aware of new potentialities, many of which would not become apparent without such planning. Unless there is a carefully thought out program of purposes, an association misses opportunities to function constructively.

Some of these opportunities may be of critical importance. For example, one hears about interference with the curriculum of the schools by well meaning but imperfectly informed legislators. The addition of compulsory subjects by legislation results in the curtailment of other subjects, and music is likely to be among those that suffer. How many state music teachers' associations pursue the purpose of informing public opinion or influencing public policy? Or of seeking to guide legislation in directions favorable to the music teachers' interests?

A state music teachers' association cannot operate alone. No association can operate alone. There must be a close and meaningful coordination of purposes, and a cordial warmth of relationship, between the state music teachers' association and the national parent organization, the Music Educators National Conference. There must be a similar clarity of understanding with the state education association and with the other subsidiary or auxiliary teachers' associations within the state. The exploration of this one topic could take the space of an article, so it will not be further developed here.

It should be pointed out, however, that every association must aim to be most active where its weight can be most effective and where it is best equipped to operate, though never to the impairment of cooperation with other associations toward the realization of common objectives.

As a fundamental proposition, every association's purpose ought to be supported by some educational purpose, and with this proposition as a guide it should be the basic objective of a state music teachers' association to work in every direction for the greater effectiveness of music education.

The specific purposes that may be pursued by a state music teachers' association will fall into three main groups:

(1) *Integration with the community.*

(2) *The improvement of music education through the improvement of teaching.*

(3) *The increase of opportunities for children to enrich their lives through music.*

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The first of these categories, *integration with the community,* is at the same time one of the least developed and one of the most potentially fruitful objectives which state music educators' associations can pursue. The importance which educational organizers are currently attaching to it is evident in the list of purposes given in three recent articles: (1) "A Program for the Advancement of Music Education," being the report of the Executive Committee of the Music Educators National Conference, published in the MUSIC EDUCATORS JOURNAL for March 1946. (2) The editorial, "Building an Action Program for the Local Association," in the March 1946 *NEA Journal.* (3) The editorial, "Building an Action Program for the State Association," in the April 1946 *NEA Journal.* In all these papers there is evident an emphasis on purposes which extend beyond the immediate interests of teaching and pursue the interests of education as a factor in civic and even in national life.

Integration of music with the community involves much more than the impact of the schools on the citizens. That is an important factor, but it is only a factor. More important is the integration of music with living. The community, as far as this discussion is concerned, is the sum total of what is being lived.

From this point of view, one of the most important purposes that a state music teachers' association can pursue is the development of the public's attitude toward music. This development must express itself not only in the increased enjoyment and functioning of music in home and community, but also in very practical matters of legislation and appropriations. An association cannot be conscious of its function if it does nothing when its rural districts, for example, are inadequately provided with music instruction. This may be the result of poor teaching, or poor equipment, or inadequate state supervision or state coordination of music education. Whatever the condition or the cause, the state music teachers'

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